**Helping teens see a future while getting through today**

By Dallas Morning News, adapted by Newsela staff

**Grade Level IRLA ORANGE Level**

05/22/2014

Word Count **713**

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When Jordan Henderson was 18 he was arrested for drug distribution. He has turned his life around and now sees a positive future. "I always thought it would be much better to be dead than in jail," he said in his Richardson, Texas, neighborhood on May 9, 2014.

DALLAS — Growing up in a dangerous Dallas neighborhood, Jordan Henderson prayed he would live to be 21.

Unable to see a future for himself, the 18-year-old got involved in drugs and other crimes.

"I always thought it would be much better to be dead than in jail," Henderson said.

Henderson’s choices should not come as a surprise, a new University of Texas at Dallas study shows. Researchers found that teens who believe they will die young are more likely to break the law. And their crimes tend to be more serious.

**A Question Of Time**

The study asked one question of more than 1,300 young criminals in Arizona and Pennsylvania: How long do you think you’ll live? Their answers ranged from 16 to 200 years old. Researchers then checked in with them from time to time over seven years and asked them whether they committed any new crimes.

The young people, who did not think they would live very long, broke the law the most. Those who could imagine a future got a lot better.

“You can’t just say all of these serious offenders ... are going to be bad forever," said UTD criminologist Alex Piquero. He led the study published last month.

Letting kids know "that your life now is not destiny” can make a difference.

For a long time, Henderson felt he had no choice. He didn't know any adults who went to college and many of the adults he did know sold drugs, he said. Earlier this year, Henderson himself was arrested for selling marijuana.

“I basically had no visible hope,” he said. “I thought to myself, this is the lifestyle that everybody before me shows. This is the lifestyle that everyone around me is doing and this is the lifestyle I have to choose."

**A Typical Mindset**

That's something 15-year-old Merl Lovings can relate to. His father is in jail serving a 15-year prison sentence. Last year, Lovings said he stole a BB gun and intended to sell it.

Lovings believes he’ll live to be about 50 or 60. But right now, he worries a lot about how to provide for his young brother and sister. He recently began selling candy to help support them.

He has not thought that much about his own future. He has vague ideas of joining the Navy or pursuing a rap career.

Piquero said that’s a typical mindset for many young lawbreakers. “They have to basically survive today, and they can’t even think about 30 years from now,” he said.

Piquero said he hopes the government will give more help to teens from poor families.

But he said parents and teachers are really important also. They need to tell teens that success is possible and encourage them to develop long-term goals.

**A Pat On The Back**

An honest day’s work, combined with a simple pat on the back, can make all the difference, said Chad Houser.

Houser runs the Dallas-based Cafe Momentum. The nonprofit restaurant provides jobs to young men coming out of jail. These young men go to school without textbooks and worry about their next meal. They live in neighborhoods overrun with trash, with guns around every corner.

In their world, an early death is possible, said Houser. They see it all around them. Houser said he’s never heard a teen talk about living beyond age 20.

But their outlook changes with the chance to prepare and serve food in some of the finest restaurants. They feel approval and the joy that comes from having something to live for and work toward, he said.

“It works in every case,” Houser said. “When you give them hope and encouragement and literally, as silly as it sounds, a pat on the back, a ‘good job,’ it changes their" attitude.

As for Henderson, his arrest for marijuana turned out to be a turning point. He enrolled in school and will now attend Fisk University in Tennessee.

Henderson now hopes he can live into his 90s to see his children and grandchildren.

“I pray that I live to see the generational curse I’m so accustomed to be broken,” he said. “To be that difference maker, to be that one person who decided to make a change … that, to me, would be the hope I never got.”